

## *The Patient Experience Post*

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## Post-discharge Calls: Review the pros and cons, then just do it

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Post-discharge calls have always been important for patient service and quality care. The need for this follow up, though, has been gaining attention recently due to a new direct connection between patient satisfaction results and CMS payments. HCAHPS scores are likely to represent a percentage of annual Medicare payment in new hospital reimbursement formulas. For those hospitals that have not already been doing formal post-discharge calls, the question is no longer *if* the calls should be done, but *how*.

Many hospitals implement their post-discharge call program, in house. There are a number of benefits to in-house call programs:

- Ready access to patient records
- Brand reinforcement
- Ability to involve members of the care team who delivered inpatient care
- Opportunity to identify or prevent adverse events before they escalate
- Possible increase of patient satisfaction scores and likelihood of referrals

Of course, there are drawbacks for doing the calls in house as well:

- Most reach only a fraction of discharged patients because other work gets in the way
- Some hospitals can't staff the call center at night and weekends when discharged patients are most easily reached
- Inability to consistently staff the services with trained callers
- Creates an often unwelcome increase in staff workload
- Decreases staff's availability to attend to inpatients

In a perfect world—one where there is no shortage of time and no competing demands—the nurses who deliver care at the bedside would be the people to follow up with patients after discharge. But, we're not operating in a perfect world. The reality today is that patients in the beds must take precedence over patients who have been discharged. Despite their best intentions, hospital administrators and nursing staff struggle to implement post-discharge phone calls that are completed consistently and that provide actionable information that is used to make process improvements that can impact patient care.

Because of both the challenges of creating and maintaining an effective post-discharge call program and the increasing importance of doing this critical follow up, many hospitals are choosing to outsource the function. There are drawbacks to outsourcing as well, including:

- Initial unfamiliarity with hospital branding messages
- Lack of linkage with patient scheduling system (unless the call center handles this service as well)

- Calls may or may not be handled by personnel with sufficient medical knowledge
- Additional administration is required to report key data in patient records

But, more often than not, the benefits outweigh the potential drawbacks:

- Outreach programs can be run day or night, reaching discharged patients more effectively at times more convenient for them
- Reduced burden on hospital staff
- Cost efficiencies when compared to the costs of using hospital staff
- The use of trained callers with clinical experience
- An opportunity to identify or prevent adverse events before they escalate
- Results are immediately documented in a central, electronic location
- The implementation of a consistent process for patient follow up and data collection across all discharge calling areas

Conducting formal, well-planned, and consistent discharge calls is important for individual patients, and that's the number one reason for doing them. These calls are also important for your hospital and for future patients, and this benefit is sometimes overlooked or unrealized. When calls are well managed, tracked, and documented, hospitals are able to spot trends that may indicate either opportunities for process improvement or best practices that could be replicated throughout the hospital.

There has never been a better or more important time to implement a post-discharge call program, whether you do it in house or choose to outsource.

*Learn more about ways you can ensure that all of your customer interactions, including over-the-phone interactions, support your healthcare organization's brand, as in [Living Your Brand Promise](#), featuring Kent Seltman, co-author of Management Lessons From Mayo Clinic. As the former Director of Marketing at Mayo Clinic, Seltman was charged with managing the brand for this world-renowned organization. During this 90-minute presentation, you'll hear about crucial elements in aligning the brand promise with the patient experience in order to build trust and credibility with customers. For only \$89, you'll receive all this: pre-session worksheets, a session workbook, webinar slides, and an audio CD of the 90-minute webinar, complete with the Q&A session.*

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*Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000).*